

Six tips for starting a CERT

If your jurisdiction has been thinking about starting up a community emergency response team, here are some ideas from those who've already gone there.

By Colin A. Campbell

Hundreds of community emergency response teams already exist across the United States and, as you read this, hundreds more are in the formative stages. And these CERTs all do the same things: they recruit, train, organize, retain, drill, activate and respond.

While these teams accomplish the same tasks, their methods are usually different. These differences can often be a vital learning tool to help the thousands of people and hundreds of communities involved in CERTs avoid squandering scarce financial resources by duplicating efforts and re-inventing the wheel.

Though they're obviously not an exhaustive list, the six tips in this article are HPP's way of helping with that effort.

Tip #1: Assess your needs (like a business) and develop a business plan. Contributed by Frank Lucier, president of North American Emergency Management and former CERT coordinator for the San Francisco Fire Department.

What hazards might the CERT face? What are the team's resources? What are the team's weaknesses? These are some of the questions that Lucier suggests a CERT ask in its formative stages. "If you answer these questions initial-

ly," Lucier says, "you can target your training program to meet the needs identified in your assessment."

Lucier, who hosts The Connection newsletter on his Web site <www.naem.com>, says the assessment should be done through emergency management offices because they know what the hazards are. "CERTs don't operate autonomously," he explains. "They are part of a system, and that system should help with the assessment."

The goal of the assessment, according to Lucier, is to put down what CERT will do in a disaster. "Look at the hazards, look at some different standard operating procedures and train the team to meet the specific hazards that it might face."

Lucier singles out activation protocols as particularly important to document. He says CERTs often overlook SOPs for how they activate and how they communicate specific hazard information to their members.

As an aside, Lucier thinks it's important to point out that communities must learn how to put CERTs to maximum use after a disaster. "CERT is a real resource for communities," he emphasizes, "but communities have to figure how best to use that resource."

Tip #2: Secure the support of all the stakeholders in the community. Contributed by Division Chief Vic Valdes,

CERT coordinator, Fremont (Calif.) Fire Department, and Reynolds Davis, former CERT coordinator for the State of Nebraska.

Valdes emphasizes the absolute necessity of having buy-in from the internal stakeholders, meaning the leadership of the community, fire department management and the labor organization, and the external stakeholders, meaning the community at large. He suggests starting internally by making sure that the upper echelons of the host department and the rank-and-file see CERT as a value and not a threat.

"Point out to these groups that from the Northridge Earthquake to 9-11, response resources were overwhelmed, causing a delay between the disasters and response by government agencies," he explains. He adds that it's important for internal stakeholders to realize that CERT won't be converting paid positions to volunteers.

"They must be made aware," Valdes says, "that CERT gives a department the opportunity to engage the community and strengthen its position in the community." He predicts, however, that this perception by some of the stakeholders "will be a stumbling block for some departments and some cities."

Davis, who ran Nebraska's statewide CERT program from January 2003 through June 2004, is more specific in his recommendation about stakehold-



At a recent drill, CERT members in Fairfax County, Va., use a 4 x 8 sheet of plywood to move this victim with lower leg amputation.

CERTprofessionals.com/Derek Rowan (x2)

ers. He says it's absolutely imperative that those forming a CERT contact their local emergency managers and convince them that CERT is a wonderful resource. "Tell them that CERTs are a ready, trained resource that can respond to a disaster and do all sorts of things."

As an example, Davis points to an airport disaster drill conducted in Nebraska several years ago. During the drill, finding the victims was a problem. "In future drills, and real disasters, in Nebraska," he says, "CERTs will be used to find the victims, freeing up fire, EMS and police to treat the victims, mitigate the disaster and maintain order."

How do you properly contact your local emergency managers? Davis suggests treating it like a business contact. (Davis is a former corporate executive who specialized in fixing broken businesses.) He recommends producing a brochure, packaging it with a cover letter, sending it to the emergency managers and following up with a phone call. The cover letter should emphasize



Two Fairfax County firefighters assist CERT members with an injured survivor. Even though there were over 50 live victims, only one engine company responded on this drill, which could be a realistic situation if the incident was very large or widespread. Does your CERT practice with the fire department?

that CERTs will make the emergency managers look good and will lighten their workloads. Davis says this approach usually elicits a good response.

Tip #3: Form a local Citizen Corps Council. Contributed by Chief Larry Wright, Rowlett (Texas) Fire Department.

A strong Citizen Corps Council is

Asset mapping as a community-building tool

*By Claudia Albano, Office of Neighborhoods
City of Fremont, Calif.*

Do you know your neighbors? You might think that neighborhood leaders such as PTA presidents, neighborhood Crime Watch captains and CERT volunteers would know each other, but they often don't. Research shows that when neighbors, particularly active neighbors, know each other, communities are stronger. In communities where few people know each other, trust is low, and problems are harder to solve and take more resources.

Americans have reason to be concerned, too. Compared to 30 years ago, we're doing more solitary things: watching TV, searching the Web or spending time in long commutes. That means we spend less time getting to know our neighbors, becoming involved in community groups and organizations, and strengthening relationships with friends. Many are concerned that left unchecked, this will degrade the safety of our communities and the vibrancy of our democracy, since a connected, trusting community is a prerequisite for both.

Fremont, Calif., is a 92-square-mile city with a population of 210,000 in the San Francisco Bay Area. For the past three years, the Office of Neighborhoods has been working to strengthen the relationships among residents as an innovative community-building strategy. At the heart of this strategy are Neighborhood Networks, informal networks of key neighborhood leaders. Asset mapping, as popularized in the book "Building Communities from the Inside Out," by John P.

Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, is the primary tool used to develop them.

Specifically, a Neighborhood Network is a group of residents who represent a wide variety of neighborhood groups and organizations, both formal and informal, who meet at least twice a year to:

- Exchange information about what's going on in the neighborhood and with its various groups and organizations.
- Get to know each other.
- Support each other's efforts.
- Work together to solve problems.

The asset-mapping technique is used to help residents form their Neighborhood Network and to help them understand the key role they play in making their communities safe and their civic life vibrant.

This is an outline of the steps Fremont's Office of Neighborhoods took to develop Neighborhood Networks and how they employed the asset-mapping technique.

Step One: Every resident has gifts, skills and capacities. Strong communities are those in which these capacities are not only identified and valued, but also used and shared. When residents' skills are put to productive use in the community, residents feel valued and better connected to the people around them, and the community improves, too.

Using a list of possible skills and capacities as a way to kick-start thinking, the first step is to ask members to identify the gifts, talents and capacities they could bring to their community. Typically, residents identify a number of skills

necessary to give direction to a CERT program, run the program, make the decisions and spend the money, says Wright.

“And speaking of money,” he points out, “a local jurisdiction now cannot receive federal funding, through the Department of Homeland Security, without a local council in place.” Rowlett just received a second DHS CERT grant, which will be administered by the Rowlett council.

When the city was looking to start up its CCC, it used individuals who were already interested in CERT as a base and formed the council around them. Now the board includes Wright, a member of the city council, a member of the chamber of commerce and three citizens. The citizens are all instructors for the CERT program, and one of them works for the American Heart Association.

Wright says the council can be a big help with marketing efforts. In Rowlett, it authorized the placement of flyers describing CERT in the local water bills, resulting in the largest number of

inquiries about the program. CERT flyers were also handed out at local festivals and city functions.

The council members also spoke about CERT to service clubs and were quoted in newspaper articles about CERT, both in the local newspaper and the Dallas Morning News.

Tip #4 and Tip #5: Be organized right from the start, and secure the support of the business community. Contributed by Chief Michael J. White and Engineer/Paramedic Renee Hamblin, CERT program manager, Surprise (Ariz.) Fire Department.

Hamblin emphasizes that it’s important for a CERT to hit the ground running. The fire department in Surprise, a bedroom community of 75,000 people and 78 square miles 30 miles west of Phoenix, used the FEMA Web site to do research on how to set up and run a program, and to download forms available on the site.

“It’s also important to call other CERTS across the country,” Hamblin says, “so you don’t wind up re-invent-

ing the wheel all the time.”

Hamblin says a good database is important, one that’s flexible and allows you to retrieve the information you need. To do this, she explains, the CERT application form should get lots of information from the applicants, including their interests, hobbies and specialties.

“In Surprise,” Hamblin explains, “when we want an engineer for an incident, we just type in ‘Engineer,’ hit ‘Search’ and we have our engineers.”

Both Hamblin and White say it’s vital to the eventual success of a CERT program to have the support of local businesses and national businesses with facilities in the community (Tip #5).

To secure business support, the department put together a customized PowerPoint presentation and videotape, which business leaders and owners could review at their convenience and educate themselves about CERT. As a result, the Surprise CERT, with 75 members, receives significant support from business.

they have or things they could do that they had not thought about before, from visiting the elderly to coaching a youth sports team. This exercise is instrumental in helping people realize the power they have to make a difference in their community and to prepare them for the next exercise.

Step Two: Groups and associations are the amplifiers of



Fremont, Calif., CERT members participate in a training exercise.

individual gifts, talents and capacities. Groups may be formal, with by-laws and elected officers, such as a business association or faith group, or informal, with no officers or formal members, such as a book club or baby-sitting co-op. An important part of building community is finding out what associations are functioning in a neighborhood.

The second step is to ask residents to brainstorm the groups and associations they’re affiliated with or know about. A list of possible types of organizations, such as “arts,” “business,” “charitable” and “civic” is given to the group to help them brainstorm. Once members have brainstormed an individual list, they’re asked to come up with a group list. This becomes the basic organizing tool for the Neighborhood Network.

Step Three: Group members are then asked to look at the list of organizations and suggest who will contact what group to see if they would like to join the Neighborhood Network. The group members are given training on how to make contact with each organization and talk about the purpose of a Neighborhood Network. This is how the Neighborhood Network grows and includes more and more neighborhood associations and groups.

Neighborhood Networks stress relationship-building, and asset mapping is a key tool in helping organize them. Asset mapping helps individuals get in touch with their own skills, gifts and capacities as well as understand the role associations play to leverage these. Asset mapping is a creative tool that will enliven and deepen any community-building effort that seeks to help residents understand just how vibrant they and their communities are.

CERT tips and info on the Web

- The Federal Emergency Management Agency's CERT Web site <<http://training.fema.gov/emiweb/CERT/>> has tips on starting and maintaining a CERT program, frequently asked questions (FAQs), a downloadable brochure, and training materials in English and Spanish.
- The Citizen Corps Council Web site <www.citizencorps.gov> has information on CERT and other community emergency response volunteer opportunities.
- The Connection, an e-newsletter hosted on Frank Lucier's Web site <www.naem.com> has articles on and from CERTs across the country and around the world, as well as articles on various CERT issues.
- Run a Google search at <www.google.com>. This search will result in an unending list of links to state, regional and local CERTs and organizations. The Web sites of these organizations contain valuable information on CERT programs, training, standard operating procedures and a variety of other topics.

Lowe's has committed to providing equipment, wood and other supplies to the CERT. "Whether we need wood for cribbing or chain saws for clearing debris," Hamblin says, "Lowe's has pretty much opened its doors to us." The team is in the process of negotiating a similar agreement with Home Depot.

Two grocery chains, Safeway and Albertson's, have pledged food, not only for disasters, but for events and fund-raising activities, for example, hot dogs and buns for sale at a car wash. When the Surprise CERT was activated in August 2000 to help look for a lost child (50 members responded), the grocery stores called to see if the search teams needed anything. In addition, Wal-Mart told the team it would provide water whenever it was needed, along with care packages of clothes and other necessities for families after a disaster.

Tip #6: Make sure you have enough recruitment materials on hand, not only for prospective members, but for other members of the community, businesses and non-profit organizations. Contributed by Thomas Reinkober, president, Canterbury Woods Civic Association. (Canterbury Woods is a 535-home subdivision in Fairfax County, Va.)

"You will lose potential CERT members if you are not able to promptly give them materials that clearly explain the purposes and requirements of CERT," says Reinkober. Accordingly, he and the Canterbury Woods CERT recommend the following materials for those jurisdictions thinking of starting a team:

- A PowerPoint presentation, both an electronic version and a hard copy for those who don't have access to a computer.
- A telephone script for calling potential team members, so the recruitment message is clear and consistent.
- A list of frequently asked questions (FAQs), especially about purpose, physical requirements and training.
- A team Web site, or at least some CERT information on another site, for example, a local government Web site.

- Publicity in the local news media.

"It doesn't hurt to have articles in the local newspapers and stories on television and radio stations," Reinkober says, "because then people are hearing about CERT from a variety of different sources."

Reinkober emphasizes the importance of clear, consistent and repeated communication with potential CERT team members. "People are willing to volunteer their time," he points out, "if they have a complete understanding of what is being asked of them."

He also warns CERTs to keep in touch with potential members after they are recruited and before training, "because you could lose people if you don't." HPP

Colin A. Campbell is a freelance writer based in Annandale, Va., and has nearly 30 years of experience covering fire service and emergency management issues. He recently helped organize a 20-person CERT in the Canterbury Woods section of Fairfax County, Va., and has completed the county fire and rescue department's 32-hour CERT training.